The Mysterious Barricades
or
There's wine in the barrels

To consider the old, but seemingly unsolved, question of "*The Mysterious Barricades*", and what, precisely, that title means, demands a new look at the facts at our disposal. But we must not forget to acknowledge the debt we owe to those who have studied this question before us: I will begin therefore by quoting Philippe Beaussant, one of the first of these "pathfinders" in France. In his book about Couperin[1], he writes: "The first difference between the *Second Book* (Second Livre) and the First, is the unity we find in each *Order* (Ordre)". Once he has underlined the unity of the key structure in the *Sixth Order* (all the pieces are written in B flat Major, none are therefore in a minor key), Beaussant adds[2]: "This *Sixth Order* reveals new evidence of unity in the subject matter of the themes, mostly pastoral". "Georgic" would perhaps be a better word – if we continue to use virgilian vocabulary: what is glorified, in fact, is not so much nature in itself but the work that men accomplish in the countryside – men that means peasants who, as we know, made up over 90 % of the population at the time of Couperin (and that for many years to come). We find summoned successively: harvesters (necessary for bread making); sheepfolds (necessary for milk, if we put aside the gallant sense of the word "bergeries" in the French language of the time, which would not be relevant in this *Sixth Order*) ; a gossip, who could well be a sturdy peasant woman, and, finally, a fly who, if the symbolic enemy of the royal lion in one of La Fontaine's fables[3], is in fact, in the reality of farming at the time, above all that of the peasant in his work. The pieces entitled *Les Langueurs tendres* (Tender Languors) et *Le gazouillement* (Birdsong) are to be considered in a more "arcadian" light, and *La Bersan*, most probably a tribute or a portrait: notably that of André Bauyn de Bersan, who was farmer general (tax collector) at the time of Louis XIV. In general, all these pieces, or nearly, conjure up scenes of the countryside and are, in their stylized fashion, descriptive. The presence of barricades in this bucolic context seems, to say the least… mysterious: what's the explanation?

I will no longer make any mystery of my hypothesis or, in other words, to spell it out clearly, I will no longer beat about the barrel: which is precisely

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1 Philippe Beaussant, *François Couperin*, Fayard, 1980, p. 379

2 *ibid*., p. 382

3 Jean de La Fontaine, *The Lion and the Fly*, Second Book, Fable IX

what's missing in this totally coherent picture – but is it really absent? This question, I think, does not come as a surprise: for instance, if one looks at any peasant scene painted by the Le Nain Brothers, one can observe the presence of wine in the middle of the painting. If one cannot agree that *The Mysterious Barricades* has anything to do with wine, at least it would seem to me common sense to presume that one could only discover the meaning of this title if we use a bucolic vocabulary. If we agree with Jean Saint-Arroman and Philippe Lescat that there is "a very probable … relationship with language or with mannered literature" (The Fuzeau Edition of the Second Book), it does not mean, in my hypothesis, that Couperin was making any gallant allusions: but he does write in a light-hearted, bantering tone, often used by people close to the poet Vincent Voiture, for example, in the second quarter of the seventeenth century.

If one accepts, the time I develop my idea, my wine making hypothesis, what could be the meaning of each of the two words used? That of the word "barricades" would obviously come from the word "barriques" (the French word for barrels T.N.). Barriquades (with a q) is, incidentally, the name chosen by a group of sixty ecological wine makers in the Aquitaine district – which goes to show that "there's nothing new under the sun…" Let us note that Couperin likes using the suffix –ade, which he uses in a strange way when he writes "sonade" (sonate or sonata T.N.) or "cantade" (cantate or cantata T.N.).

Now, let us try and explain the meaning of the word "mysterious". If we look at the first edition of the "Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française" (Dictionary of the French Academy T.N.), 1694, at the entry "Mysterious" we read :

> *Mysterious, adj. Which contains some mystery, some secret, some hidden meaning. It is correctly used in Religious Matters* [in others words, it is especially pertinent in Religious Matters – see the entry "Proprement" (correctly T.N.) in the same dictionary]. *The Ancient Egyptians shrouded the secrets of their Religion and their Morals with mysterious signs, everything is mysterious in our Religion, everything is mysterious in the Bible, all the words are mysterious, they contain a mysterious meaning, it must be understood with a mysterious meaning in a mysterious way.*

And slightly before:

> *We call using the plural, the holy mysteries, the sacrifice of the Mass, and the Holy Communion. In this way one says, to participate in the holy mysteries, to come near the holy mysteries, meaning, to participate in the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ; and to celebrate the holy mysteries, meaning, to celebrate Mass.*

Coming back to our barricades, there are therefore two possible reasons for

their "mysterious" nature chosen by Couperin – and one doesn't disqualify the other. The first one is secular: these barricades are not what they would appear to be and the real meaning is to be found elsewhere (in other words, mystery being synonymous of puzzle). This explanation is the simplest, the easiest to agree with, if not the most likely. A second explanation is of a more religious nature. From a Christian point of view, the range of subjects brought together by Couperin in this *Sixth order*, if we include the wine, has not only "virgilian" echoes, but also biblical ones: with "the harvesters", Couperin consecrates the bread ("In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread…" (Genesis 4/19) but here it's done happily!); if the *Mysterious Barricades* has any link with what Rabelais called "the divine bottle", then the service of Holy Communion is fulfilled. The cult worshipping Bacchus was already called "mysterium" in Roman times, and the 17th century had not forgotten it. In fact, in a profound way, wine and mystery have always been closely linked.

It is interesting to consider the word "barricades" and the way it was used in Couperin's time: the word isn't forbidden, of course, but it must have been used with precaution. If a middle class man like Furetière, in his dictionary (1690) felt free enough, after the definition of the word (very similar to what one could find today) to evoke "The *Barricades* of the League, those of the revolt called *La Fronde* made in Paris in the month of August 1648", these barricades were not to be mentioned within the immediate surroundings of Louis XIV, for whom "La Fronde" had been a traumatic experience and who certainly did not want the subject to be talked about. Which in fact, Couperin avoided doing because the *Second Book*, which contains the *Sixth Order*, wasn't published until after the King's death. Some people are surprised, in fact, by the length of time between the publication of Couperin's first two books (from three to four years), since Couperin had announced the rapid publication of the Second Book immediately after the appearance of the first: could one imagine that the death of the great king had persuaded him to change his plans? By its subject matter, the *sixth order* – which is at the beginning of the book (the best place, obviously) – sounds like a musical echo to that famous phrase of La Bruyère "Je veux être peuple"[4] (I want to be as close to common people as possible T.N.). An opinion which echoes the ideas, specifically, of those close to Fénelon, private tutor to the Duke of Burgundy, and La Fontaine, who dedicated his twelfth book of fables to the same Duke, and some other people. (We should not forget that the Duke of Burgundy was the grandson of Louis XIV, and that Fénelon educated him hoping he would become an enlightened monarch, giving more importance to the well-being of his people than to his own wealth and glory).

4 La Bruyère, *Les Caractères*, *Des Grands*, 25

Has it often been noticed that it is rather curious for a composer, as popular in court as Couperin was, to put to music poems by La Fontaine (*Épitaphe d'un paresseux*) (Epitaph for a lazy man T.N.) who was the only great writer of the time to have a particularly strained relationship with his sovereign? Not to mention the probable allusions to the Fables slipped into, here and there, the titles of the pieces by Couperin; for example, as I said, the fly is the symbolic animal, of no importance who defies the King of the animals provoking the wrath of the latter. Well, François Couperin a reformer? Why not? After all, as Olivier Baumont writes in his inspired little book on Couperin[5]: "Stretching over some forty years, his harpsichord works appear to be the music equivalent of the "Memoires" of Saint-Simon or the "Caractères" of La Bruyère: a theatrical demonstration both subjective and partial of the court of Versailles and its different actors". Well, could there be more detailed commentators of the reign of Louis XIV (no, of course, of any monarch) than Saint-Simon and, in a very different way, La Bruyère?

But perhaps, quite simply, now that Louis XIV was dead, Couperin didn't want to be so closely associated with him? In 1722, when he published the *Concerts Royaux* (Royal Concerts), he was proud of the appreciation shown by the late King for his art, but five years have gone by between time, during which the resentment that many had felt towards the "Sun King" at the time of his death, had begun to evolve towards an idolatry of the greatness of France during his reign (which Voltaire points out very strongly several decades later in "*The Century of Louis XIV*" (Siècle de Louis XIV)).

We should now look, within the work itself, at the reasons that justify our hypothesis that "The Mysterious Barricades" is a piece about wine making. The rapid swing present throughout the piece (a swing based on the crotchet in a 2/2 bar) could well symbolize the crushing of bunches of grapes, in a steady rhythm, in order to extract the juice – because one knows, of course, that this is how it used to be done, and still is in certain "ecological" vineyards. (By the way, it has been shown that this crushing was often done by young women, however it would be risky to deduce that the gallant hypothesis and the wine hypothesis do not disqualify each other). Thus, as opposed to the lighter style of a gavotte (if we take a court dance that a composer could have used for such a gallant subject) we have, thanks to a lute–style structure, a thick but liquid, texture uninterrupted as we listen, and which come from below (bass notes of the keyboard), matching the alternatives movements of the feet. And, instead of the charming choreography of a gavotte, we have a choreography very different, common in a subtle way.

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5 Olivier Baumont, *François Couperin*, Le Seuil, 1998, p. 42

The speed indication “vivement” (lively) does not contradict this idea. If we look once again at Furetière’s dictionary, we see that “vivement” could have the meaning “ incessamment” (incessantly, unremittingly): that could mean that Couperin wants the piece to be played with a very regular rhythm, but I think it more likely that he had in mind essentially what we now call *tempo*. Anyway, the incessant side of it, is written in the music itself by the composer, the player, from this point of view, has no more to do than to make sure he doesn’t get carried away: let us say, first of all, that the piece uses a completely mechanical regularity which never stops; next, that all the phrases start on the second quaver of the bar, leaving no respite, each phrase finishes on the first beat and the next one follows on immediately. Finally, even the harmony which, basically, if we take apart the lute style structure and put aside the retardations, is quite simple and refreshing (except for the third verse, and even then …). But precisely, these systematic retardations push the music forward because one is always waiting for an inevitable resolution.

Even the choice of a lute style structure, which we have just mentioned, could have, bearing in mind our wine hypothesis, a particular meaning. Certainly, Couperin very often uses this style, but never so systematically. If one accepts that Couperin could have developed his ideas in a rhetorical way (we know that rhetoric was not the privilege of the Germans, the French refer to it often), the choice of the lute style could be thought of as belonging to the first of the five parts of rhetoric, the *inventio*. This is the moment when the composer chooses the musical ingredients which will make the effect required by the work. Let’s be pedant for a moment: the *locus materia ex qua*, and more precisely the *materia ex qua*, is where the choice is made, as Pierre-Alain Clerc says[6], “the material, the fabric, the musical substance with which the piece is made”. What better musical material than that of the lute style structure to symbolize the bunches of grapes being crushed (doesn’t one use the words “grapes of sounds” to designate chords or clusters)?

Finally, it should be noted that Johann Sebastian Bach explicitly set the operation of crushing the grapes to music in the bass *aria* of the cantata BWV 43 (*Gott fähret auf mit Jauchzen*). We should not be surprised to see the trading of grapes mentioned in the text of a sacred cantata: in the Old Testament, the victory of the Messiah is compared to this action. Bach writes there a perfectly isorythmic bass made up wide alterning intervals, thus producing a sway reminiscent of that of the fullers, from one foot to the other[7]. There is therefore a certain similarity between the means employed by Bach and by Couperin –

6 Pierre-Alain Clerc, Discours sur la rhétorique musicale (available on the internet), p.10

7 See Albert’s Schweitzer analysis of this cantata extract in his book : *J.S. Bach*, Dover, 1966, p. 63

assuming that my hypothesis about *The Mysterious Barricades* is right.

Perhaps those who read these lines may think that I have gone too far – as people say. Perhaps I am wrong, but I have a different feeling, that of someone who has look beyond the boundaries of traditional research. I think that one can sometimes be trapped in a tradition when we consider *The Mysterious Barricades* as having a vaguely immaterial character, as, for example, the following extract of the *Guide de la musique de piano et de clavecin* edited in France by Fayard[8], which sounds to me rather biased, embarrassed by the indication of speed and character given by the composer: "above this rondo (…), Couperin writes "vivement" (lively). Not being fast, it is not, therefore, a slow piece, but a melancholic and mysterious piece". Couperin indication, however, is synonymous of warmth and verve, there's no doubt about that. A melancholic verve? That's an oxymoron! Still very common, this way of thinking about the *Barricades*, could well be, originally an invention of the 19th century, based on piano playing… Couperin is no doubt one of the finest harpsichord composers: he is nonetheless a man of order, even in the choice of his titles, where fantasy could never get the better of precision and simple logic.

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(Translated by Tony Prins, except the penultimate paragraph)

[8] Adelaïde de Place in the *Guide de la musique de piano et de clavecin*, edited by François-René Tranchefort, Fayard, 1987, p. 269